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ABSTRACT

The digest is based on a full length report (with the same title) on African-American and Hispanic faculty at predominantly white, four-year institutions of higher education. The full report provides a definitive review of the literature and institutional practice on the topic. Three topics are discussed: (1) how necessary affirmative action really is, noting that it continues to be necessary because of its limited success and because of the pluralistic nature of society); (2) why more progress has not been made in hiring diverse faculty (e.g. lack of accurate availability data, political and philosophical dominance of issues related to merit and standards for qualification rather than equity, and a focus on regulation and compliance rather than on advocacy in affirmative action operations); and (3) what can be done to increase employment opportunities for African-American and Hispanic faculty (e.g. adopting proactive rather than reactive approaches to seeking such faculty, more use of minority networks or vitae banks, and strong leadership among members of the target groups who are already part of the campus community). Contains 7 references. (SM)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Affirmative Rhetoric, Negative Action: African-American and Hispanic Faculty at Predominantly White Institutions

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This is an analysis of affirmative action theory and practice for African-American and Hispanic faculty in predominantly white, four-year institutions of higher education. It examines the history of affirmative action, supply and demand issues, institutional approaches to affirmative action, factors outside of the academy that affect faculty employment, and case studies of effective practices or new initiatives.

Critics and advocates of affirmative action have focused on similar issues in debates. Both groups often assume that affirmative action has led to significant increases in the number of minority faculty at predominantly white institutions, but this is not the case. Both groups also cite the threat of federal action as a result of affirmative action failure. However, no college or university has ever lost federal funds as a result of noncompliance—or if they have, this fact has not been publicized.

Several questions for consideration emerge as we approach the 1990s. Is affirmative action really necessary? Why hasn't more progress been made in hiring African-American and Hispanic faculty? What should be done to increase employment opportunities for African-American and Hispanic faculty?

Is Affirmative Action Really Necessary?

Any discussion of affirmative action must recall the historical factors leading to this solution. Before World War II, Hispanics and African-Americans were virtually invisible in higher education. Moreover, lack of "qualified" minority faculty was not the reason for the racial segregation of faculty. Even by 1936, there was a sizable group of African-Americans with Ph.D.s, 80 percent of whom taught at three historically African-American institutions (Atlanta, Fisk, and Howard Universities). By 1941, only two African-American tenured faculty members in predominantly white institutions can be identified. By 1947, out of 3,000 African-Americans who listed "college teacher" as their occupation, only 78 had ever taught at a white school—many as part-time lecturers. By 1958 there were 200 African-American faculty members at predominantly white institutions, a figure that increased to 300 by 1961.

By 1972—the year affirmative action in higher education was initiated—African-Americans represented 2.9 percent of all faculty (including those at historically African-American universities). Other minority groups (including Hispanics, but not Asians) were 2.8 percent of the total faculty. There were only 1,500 faculty who could be identified as Mexican-American or Chicano (600 of these were at community colleges).

The number of African-American and Hispanic faculty increased until 1976, then began to level off or decline. Between 1977 and 1984, national faculty representation for African-Americans dropped from about 4.4 percent to 4.0 percent, and for Hispanics from 1.7 percent to 1.4 percent. Note that most of the African-American faculty are at historically African-American institutions (although they comprise just 60 percent of the faculty at historically African-American institutions).

Affirmative action continues to be necessary because of its limited success, and because of the pluralistic nature of our society. Colleges—as institutions where people expect to challenge their perspectives and values—can help prepare our nation to deal with diversity in many ways: by providing students with role models, by preparing minority youth to assume positions of leadership, and by supporting minority-related scholarship.

Why Hasn't More Progress Been Made in Hiring Diverse Faculty?

Proponents of the "availability pool" rationale for the low numbers of African-American and Hispanic faculty can readily point to data to support their arguments: the small and/or declining number of African-American/Hispanic Ph.D.s; the underrepresentation of minorities in particular disciplines such as science and engineering; the concentration of African-American and Hispanic doctorates in the fields of education, humanities, and social sciences; and the trend toward nonacademic employment among doctoral degree holders.

Nevertheless, the lack of affirmative action progress cannot be explained solely by arguments about the availability pool. The proportion of African-Americans and Hispanics who hold faculty positions in predominantly white institutions has never come close to the percentage of African-Americans and Hispanics who hold terminal degrees, even in fields where the supply is relatively good. Indeed, the decline of the African-American professoriat in the late 1970s occurred despite growth in the total number of faculty positions and in the number of African-Americans with Ph.D.s. In certain fields, minorities are more likely than whites to state their reason for working part-time as the inability to find full-time employment.

These facts raise issues about the demand for African-American and Hispanic faculty. While it is important to increase the number of minorities with doctorates, it must be stressed that those who are already available and qualified are not being fully employed. Most minorities who have been hired have not had any special or preferential treatment.

Other reasons also help to explain the lack of progress in hiring African-American and Hispanic faculty, including the lack of accurate availability data; the political and philosophical dominance of issues related to merit and standards for qualification, rather than on equity and fair process; the focus on regulation and compliance rather than on advocacy in affirmative action operations; and an atmosphere of "deferred responsibility" within institutions, where administrators, faculty, students, and staff each hold other groups responsible.

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What Can Be Done to Increase Employment Opportunities for African-American and Hispanic Faculty?

Institutions of higher education should experience more affirmative action success if they adopt proactive, rather than reactive, approaches to seeking African-American and Hispanic faculty. Visible and determined leadership by the chief executive and academic officers of the institution is the most important element that sets the stage for successful affirmative action. Strong leaders treat affirmative action as an institutional priority for resources and staff by closely monitoring decisions and offering incentives.

The role of the faculty is also critical for affirmative action in higher education, although there is little credible evidence of strong faculty commitment to it. Rather, many successful affirmative action programs are the outgrowth of leadership among members of the target groups who are already part of the campus community.

Search committees are the standard tool for screening and interviewing candidates; hence, their composition and work strategies are important. In choosing committee members, more flexibility in defining rank and subspecialties, and the use of minority networks or vitae banks, may be useful.

Effective affirmative action offices reflect the mission and purpose of their institutions. They work to set goals rather than respond to the timelines and goals set by others. Ideally, the affirmative action officer reports to the president and does not serve concurrently as chief academic officer.

New ideas and innovative approaches are needed to develop, recruit, and retain African-American and Hispanic professors. Some institutions are using curriculum review as a key to hiring (e.g., Temple University). Others build a pool of potential professors through incentives to graduate students, including financial support and mentoring (e.g., Wayne State University and the Florida Endowment Fund). Improving primary and secondary educational opportunities (e.g., Ohio State University) is a long-term strategy.

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